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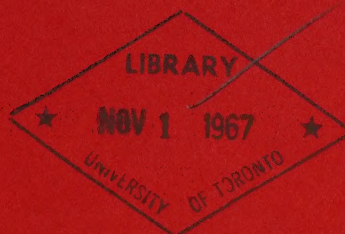
MEETING POVERTY



FACE  
À LA  
PAUVRETÉ

**Social Aspects of Poverty**

**Dr. Daniel Thursz**



**MP - 30**







SOCIAL ASPECTS OF POVERTY

Dr. Daniel Thursz

I am grateful to you for your invitation to discuss at this forum the problem of poverty and some of the steps which I consider essential to the fight for the elimination of this cancer in society. I do not speak to you today as an official of the United States Government, but rather as a fellow social worker who is deeply committed to the value system of our profession and to the proposition that concern for professionalization cannot be given priority over the fundamental task of helping people. I believe that social workers cannot be all things to all men and that they too must regard themselves as a scarce commodity to be utilized in the most effective way to help those in greatest need. Difficult as the choice may be for some, I am convinced that the most important battle for social workers is the battle against poverty.

Some of you may ask -- why the concern? Hasn't social work always been on the front-line of the battle against poverty? The answer is not simple. To be sure, some social workers have been involved in service to the poor, but many -- for various reasons -- have gravitated to settings and agencies where the predominant clientele is middle class and where service can be provided in a more professional - antiseptic setting. Richard Cloward has called attention numerous times to what he describes as the "illusion of service." In the United States, beginning in the 1930's, the public agencies replaced the private agencies in working with the poor. There were many reasons for this conscious, deliberate choice. The workers were concerned with status, the opportunity for professionalization, the problem of communication, etc. Agencies, somehow, were more respectable when they were located in respectable neighbourhoods and dealt with respectable people. And so, in the United States at least, the professional social workers left the battlefield - many still struggling with their long and largely unsuccessful love affair with psychiatry. The public agencies continued the service to poor persons -- largely reflecting the desires and attitudes of the general public. Today there are some newcomers to the arena who proclaim the failure of social work and social agencies to tackle effectively the problems of the poor. "Public welfare has failed," they shout. Public welfare may indeed have failed, but it failed because the community at large was not willing to have it succeed. The greatest indictment of the public welfare personnel is the fact that they continued to serve at the behest of the general community, fighting a battle without adequate manpower, adequate tools and a clear statement of objectives. The general community wanted the poor to be





invisible in America -- and they became invisible to a far greater extent than anyone ever imagined. In fact, the poor became invisible from the social workers and even the public and private agencies established to help them. It was a vicious cycle. Hard to reach persons and families were expected to be assisted by hard to reach agencies and workers. The dichotomy far from being bridged became even wider.

The decade of the 1950's will be known as a period of uncertainty, reaction, apathy, and materialism in the United States. We despaired of our young people and the college student was seen as a young person prematurely interested with comfort, security, and retirement. Then came the New Frontier and a new wind began to blow over the States -- from Maine to California. Americans were jarred from their apathy. New, exciting challenges were part of the agenda of a young and dynamic administration. The Peace Corps was founded to capture and rekindle the flame of altruism in America. It was during the period that a young man by the name of Michael Harrington wrote a short powerful book with the simple title of "The Other America: Poverty in the United States." In contrast with Professor J.K. Galbraith, who in his book, "The Affluent Society", described poverty in the U.S. as no longer "a massive affliction (but) more nearly an after-thought", Harrington pronounced poverty as one of the United States' gravest social problems and estimated that between forty or fifty million Americans were living in poverty. As Dwight McDonald points out, statistics on poverty are even trickier than most. Poverty is relative and it is affected by geographic considerations as well as age, size of family, etc. Today, based on far more sophisticated and complex analyses, the Office of Economic Opportunity estimates that there are 32 million Americans who live in poverty. Even for a country that regards itself as affluent, rich, and powerful, this constitutes a huge problem. Yet, the proportion of poor people in America is far smaller than it is in 90 percent of the countries of the world. I will return to this point later on in my presentation.

The rest of the story is familiar to you. Following the assassination of President Kennedy, President Johnson emphasized his commitment to surmount the obstacles to "The Great Society" and to launch a major effort -- the War on Poverty.

Harrington was not the first to challenge his countrymen to do something about poverty and the inequality with which society treats man. "The social organization has broken down





in large districts of our great city. Many of the people are very poor, the majority of them without leisure or energy for anything but the gaining of subsistence. They live for the moment, side by side, many of them without knowledge of each other, without fellowship, without local tradition or public spirit, without social organization of any kind. Practically nothing is done to remedy this. The people who might do it, who have the social contact and training, the large houses and the traditions and customs of hospitality, all live in other parts of the city." The person who wrote this accurate diagnosis of urban poverty as we know it today is Jane Addams. And she wrote this in 1890.

There are some major differences today, however, that must be emphasized. First of all, we now have the ability in the North American continent to end all economic poverty. Secondly, we are faced with the awful challenge of world poverty and the realization that the domestic battle is but a skirmish when compared to the fight against poverty on the continents of Africa and Asia. Let us heed the prophetic words of Shakespeare in Henry IV: "I am as poor as Job, my lord, but not so patient." Thirdly, we now have tools to deal with poverty and some of the underlying causes which did not exist in the days of Jane Addams: Government planning, Economic manipulation, Birth control pills and other devices that hopefully one day will have universal support, Community Organization techniques that have been tested, etc. Finally, we have a system of communication which serves both as a tool at our disposal and as a source of frustration to the poor who live amidst an affluent society.

Let me expand briefly on this last point. It is a crucial one. Some poverty exists in isolation. Those born in the mellahs of remote towns and cities of Morocco know little of the life that is lived in the United States. For centuries, the poor suffered their fate without contrast. They did not perceive another kind of life. Today, many who are caught in poverty and live in shacks and slums largely unnoticed by the rest of us are very much aware of the "good life". They see it daily on television sets, on advertisements for the "Pepsi Generation," on romantic and violent shows, and the like. I visited a migrant camp in Florida not long ago. It was typical of most migrant camps. Dirt roads, one-room huts in which whole families lived, no inside toilets, one water spigot for ten shacks. The only communal facility was a bar. Yet dozens of television antennas were visible on the roofs of the shacks. That night was unusually

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cold and as the migrants shivered in their heatless huts, they saw television shows and commercials depicting a life of affluence -- cigars, jet flights, refrigerators, turkey dinners, and Cadillacs. The poor are bombarded day and night with ads depicting an American way of life -- denied to them. No wonder there is bitterness and lawlessness among the poor. The Watts Riots were the result of a constellation of factors. One of them, however, was the desire to share in the material goods displayed so often on their television sets.

In the United States, the War on Poverty has just passed its first anniversary. It is but one of a number of important steps taken by the Government to cope with the crisis of the sixties. Americans have much to learn from their neighbours to the north and from their neighbours across the seas. Social planning is still feared and there are deep-seated suspicions of the Federal Government and its intervention in state and local matters. It is only with the advent of the Johnson administration that a fight for comprehensive medical care for the nation's older citizens has been won. Still on the agenda as unfinished business is a comprehensive medical and hospitalization plan for the country as a whole, a system of adequate benefits for the retired population of the nation, and help to large families through a uniform system which does not involve the degrading process of a means test.

It will come as no surprise to this audience that the work of the Office of Economic Opportunity, and the many programs which were financed through it, has been heavily criticized and the cause of a great deal of public discussion and controversy. Manned by newcomers to the field of social problems and by young, energetic activists, the War on Poverty was often depicted in exaggerated terms. Things were going to happen fast and there was little need for the old time warriors or their skills in this battle. They were, in the words of one observer, "irrelevant to the struggle." The goals for this effort were both numerous and fluid. At times, they were contradictory. Yet, if the War on Poverty has done nothing else, it has dramatized to the total American community the plight of its poor. The poverty of the United States is visible today even though we are just beginning to understand its complexity.

But there are additional dividends from this effort -- dividends that are just beginning to crystallize and which should influence strategies of intervention not only in the United States, but in many other parts of the world.





A number of fictions are being challenged -- and this time, the challenges are accompanied by adequate demonstration, sound research and impressive documentation. To some of you, the fictions were never accepted as truth, but let me assure you that a large number of influential persons still believe them to be a fact.

#### FICTION 1--THE POOR LIKE THINGS THE WAY THEY ARE

This often repeated assertion has been used through the ages to rationalize inaction and complacency. "You don't understand," said a public official to me not long ago, "These poor folks enjoy having illegitimate babies. They don't want anything more than a chance to drink it up on weekends." Some of you remember the classic television report by the late Edward Murrow on "See It Now." It was called "Harvest of Shame" and dealt with the migrants. Mr. Murrow was shown interviewing a farmer who said in effect: "Don't try to judge these people by your standards. They like this life."

In countless interviews, in work with poor people in urban slums, Appalachian hollows, Indian reservations, migrant camps, Job Corps training camps, etc., we have yet to find a single individual who rejects what one of my colleagues calls "The Good Life". We have yet to find one person who says: "I don't want a refrigerator or a sink." And we have yet to find a substantial number of mothers who are happy to have illegitimate children!

For four years, a special team of investigators under the direction of Hyland Lewis studied the life of poor people in the slums of Washington.

Sponsored by the Washington Health and Welfare Council, the Child Rearing Study of Low Income Families in the District of Columbia took a fresh look at poverty by living among the poor. At the onset, one of their new neighbours said, "Look here, man, you get around a lot and people talk to you, so you know a lot about what's going on. But you only know what's going on outside. You don't know what's going on behind the doors, but I do -- because I'm behind those doors." The team of social workers, anthropologists, sociologists, and journalists went behind the doors and they found among the fifty-five families they studied in depth reactions that were typically "middle-class" feelings of shame about pregnancy, anger at being abandoned, concern for the future, desire for a better life. Listen to some of the poor as the CRS workers listened:





There was no food in the house and I didn't want them to have to go to school hungry and then come home hungry too. I felt that if I kept them home with me, at least when they cried and asked for a piece of bread, I would be with them and put my arms around them.

He's come home from school with his clothes half torn off, and I'd whip him and make him fight back. Now, I have to whip him to stop him from fighting. Out in the streets, the big boys beat the little boys---they have to fight---but the teachers don't seem to understand.

I keep telling myself there's no such thing as can't. I keep saying I'm going to manage somehow. I think a lot of people would get along better if they didn't give up so quickly. A person should set himself a certain level, reach for it and stay with it. That is what I'm struggling and keep on struggling to do.

What else could be more important to a woman than a man? Maybe it's the money. Some of the men give them money, but that is a simple question --- I ain't got no education, but I do have a lot of mother wit and I know there ain't nothing more important to a woman than a man.

In Puerto Rico, some thousand miles from Washington, D.C., Oscar Lewis interviewed Felicita, age 23, the mother of five children by three husbands, daughter of a prostitute. Felicita describes how her mother reacted to her frantic need for funds to feed her children. Should she become a prostitute?

My mother said: "Well, go ahead. There's good money to be made there. I was in the life for a long time and I made quite a bit of dough. All you have to do is get ready, put the children to bed, and wait until they fall asleep. Then you lock them in with a padlock. You can go out hustling this very night." ... It made me feel uncomfortable that my mama should give me such advice.

Felicita became a prostitute. Is she happy with her life? Does she live according to values that are alien to our society? Listen again:





What I'd like most for my children is for them to study and see if they can't make something of themselves. Not something very big, because I can't afford to send them to college. But I hope they at least finish high school and have a trade so they can get good jobs. And I'd like my daughters to be virgins and marry with a veil and crown. I want them to be decent people, better than I am. One should always live with hope...I worry about my situation, about not having a husband. There are times when I can't even buy milk for the children... I get fed up, but what can I do? Sometimes I feel like killing the children and then setting fire to myself.

I have taken the time to quote from these studies liberally because it seems imperative to once and for all buy the lie about the poor. There is no happiness in poverty. Let us confront those among us who should know better and yet repeat such absurd thoughts as, "Whenever you see Negroes, you see happy people ... Did you ever hear them sing? Did you ever see them dance? Anyone who dances like that and sings like that is happy."

#### FICTION 2--THE POOR ARE INARTICULATE

An assertion, often repeated, is that it is hard to communicate with poor people. They are not verbal and words have a different meaning to them. Only poor people can communicate with other poor people. Social workers, teachers, psychologists are faced with a veritable "iron curtain" in trying to work with the poor, based largely on the fact that the poor are inarticulate. The lack of verbal skill is one reason given for the decision of psychiatrists in mental hospitals to focus their analytic skills on upper-and middle-class patients, abandoning the poor to tranquilizers, shock treatment, and the like. There is little doubt that many professionals find it difficult to work with the poor. I suspect that the problem is really within them, rather than among the poor. Hylan Lewis and his colleagues indicate that their study found that "poor people speak English--not always grammatical English--with a clarity that social scientists and other professionals might well emulate. Most of the Negro poor are far from being inarticulate. Indeed, CRS workers--white as well as Negro--often found the "language" of the poor easier to understand than the jargon used





by their own colleagues." The large number of books published recently, based on tape interviews with the poor, demonstrate the eloquence, the directiveness, the clarity with which the poor talk about themselves and their fate. However, in order to communicate, people must feel that there is a listener, someone willing to engage in a constructive dialogue. Most poor have met only professionals and bureaucrats anxious to "manage" them.

### FICTION 3--THE POOR ARE CYNICAL, APATHETIC, AND HARD TO REACH

Cynicism and skepticism are appropriate responses on the part of the poor in today's world. Why shouldn't a slum dweller be suspicious of "the man" who walks up to his door? In almost every case, "the man" turns out to be a policeman, a detective, a welfare investigator, or a bill collector. Because the poor live in isolation from the mainstream of society, they are rarely in contact with outsiders who are neither exploiters or managers of their lives. Watts--while in the center of Los Angeles--is effectively barricaded by superhighways. The poor quarters of Washington tend to be separated from the rest of the community by a whole series of obstacles to communication and interaction--highways, railyards, rivers and public institutions. The poor are hard to reach and there is a veneer of hostility. Yet, our experience indicates that below this hard shell is a hope and a desire to improve their lot which does not die. This is one of the most hopeful signs. Despite the degradation and the mistreatment, the poor can be involved in community enterprises and self-help projects. Sometimes the shell is hard and can only be cracked by repeated and patient efforts. But it can be cracked. I have just completed a study of the impact of relocation on a sample of nearly 100 families that were once residents of Southwest Washington. My goal was to locate them after five years and to see whether they had successfully integrated into the new neighbourhoods where they had moved. I found most of the families heavily anomic. More than 75 per cent agreed that "these days, a person doesn't really know whom he can count on." More than the majority felt that "it's hardly fair to bring children into the world with the way things look for the future." Yet, when asked whether they thought that people who lived in the neighbourhood could organize and really do something to improve the neighbourhood, almost 75 per cent of the respondents agreed.

Today, there are more than two thousand VISTA Volunteers at work in almost every State of the Union. They work





and live among the poor under all sorts of conditions. Most have no specific skills, but they are dedicated and eager to help. They bring what professionals would call motivational therapy. They are bringing to those in the poverty ranks some hope and some concrete assistance, whether it be in terms of tutoring their children, helping mothers to learn to read so they can assist their own children, organizing tenant's councils, or helping establish pre-school nurseries. They approach their tasks as neighbours, rather than managers, and perhaps because they don't know how to fail, or because they do not stay strangers in their neighbourhoods, they succeed. The basic approach of VISTA is that of community development in which the Volunteer does not become a spokesman for the poor, but rather an enabler assisting those in poverty to act and speak for themselves. This is not so different from the work done by Donald Snowden, of the Department of Northern Affairs, in Canada which was depicted so brilliantly by Edith Iglauer in her recent book on community development efforts among Eskimos.

People become "easy-to-reach" as they learn to hope. They learn to hope as they begin meaningful interaction among themselves and with others who are willing to reach out and join in their lives.

#### FICTION 4--THE POOR NEED SPOKESMEN FOR THEM

Today, there is an abundance of spokesmen for the poor. Various groups and persons are eager to put on the mantle of leadership. Sometimes, a similar ethnic or racial background is seen as sufficient reason for expecting recognition as the natural spokesman for the poor. In some communities, agencies and community action programs are hiring neighbourhood workers who are indigenous in the hope that they can become representatives of the poor. The fact is that the poor do not need official spokesmen appointed by outside agencies or, even worse, self-appointed. They need the opportunity to organize and speak for themselves. This will not come easily. The machinery must be created and then given sufficient lubrication. The people must learn to trust it and then to control it. It is true that the so-called "poor elections" held in a number of communities in the States were disappointing in the number who participated. But they were hardly tried. In most cases, the arrangements were hasty and confusing. Even well planned it will take a much greater, persistent effort before the disenfranchised begin to



value such an instrument and use it. The democratic process is not instinctive in man. It must be learned, and those who attempt to teach it must have patience and a faith in the process itself.

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There are many other fictions that are being challenged today. The view of the poor as a homogeneous mass with similar attitudes and goals--a value system separate and rigid--is giving way to the realization that the poor tend to react in a perfectly rational way to their fate. If the responses are similar, it is because the circumstances are often similar. Yet, there is great diversity among those caught in poverty. The very concept of poverty must be broadened. There is economic poverty. But there is also the poverty of hope, the poverty of opportunity, the poverty of knowledge, and the poverty of relationship. It is to all these poverties that our War is aimed. In the process of fighting this war, we are learning that there are no easy answers.

Among the first recruits to this effort were a whole set of "true believers." They are, in a sense, fanatics who have found the only answer to the problem at hand and who are convinced that their plan and their plan alone will bring a solution to the issue. In arguing their case, they exaggerate the benefits to be derived from their action plan and they deride any other possible avenue of approach.

The difficulty in dealing with "true believers" is that their plan often has some value and is based on a realistic need. Who are the "true believers" of the War on Poverty.

#### THE POOR NEED POWER

The first and most prominent of the "true believers" is the one who sees the only answer to poverty in a shift of power in which "the establishment" will be brought to its knees and forced to make concessions to the new militant poor groups. Consensus is not possible until conflict has raged and it can hardly be expected that those in power in industry, city hall, or the "welfare establishment" will give up anything without a fight. Hence, the poor must be organized and an enemy clearly identified.





## THE POOR NEED EDUCATION

At the opposite end of the spectrum is the "true believer" who sees all other efforts failing and believes that only through a long range comprehensive program of education can the poor be truly helped. It doesn't make sense to let ignorant people make decisions about things they know little about. Poverty will be licked at the point where those who are in the poverty population can compete with equal ease with others for legitimate and significant jobs. It may be too late for the parents, but it is not too late for the children.

## THE POOR NEED MONEY

Among the "true believers" is a group which sees poverty primarily in its economic dimension. Poverty, they argue, is after all created by the lack of money. Give the poor money in a way that is not patronizing and demeaning and all the other problems will be easily handled. They suggest a "guaranteed income" scheme for the United States. They do not believe that the poor will squander the money. On the contrary, it will demonstrate how responsible the poor can be. As to the issue of work, they see this as an obsolete, outmoded question. With automation making rapid inroads in the labour force, it is important--indeed essential--to give up obsolete ideas about the value of work and move from a work oriented society to a leisure society. It is absurd to argue that people should get money only if they work, when the amount of work available in society will be reduced drastically in the years ahead.

## THE POOR NEED SERVICE

There is a fourth group of "true believers" who seem to feel that if only people were given professional assistance, they could be motivated to help themselves out of poverty. It's really a matter of relationship therapy. While in 1966, it seems a rather foolish idea, considering the emphasis given to economic and political factors, I would like to remind you that these arguments were precisely those that were used in the successful battle to obtain passage of the 1962 amendments to the United States Social Security Act. "Give us one worker for sixty cases in the public assistance category and we will show you how effective good case work can be." The reason we have not succeeded in the past is that the case loads were huge (or that few departments employ sufficient professional workers and supervisors).





## THE POOR NEED OPPORTUNITY AND JOBS

The last group of "true believers" which I want to describe briefly for you today is the group that diagnosed the problems of the poor as simply a lack of adequate opportunity structure. They reasoned that the poor were upwardly mobile, but were being frustrated by blocked avenues to success. Open up the avenues and the problem is solved. Make jobs available to the poor and they will take the jobs and begin to move into the respectable society--and deviance will drop.

Obviously, all the four groups are partially correct--and incorrect. Poverty is complex and cannot be tackled by only one programmatic method. Opportunities for jobs are important. So is power and so is education. Reducing caseloads and bringing agencies to the neighbourhoods where they are needed will also help. And, surely, poverty will always be present so long as there is insufficient money.

We have learned a good deal during the past year about the poor and the interventions necessary to help them move out of poverty. We have become aware of the ignorance of many poor persons--ignorance about sex and childbirth, credit and purchases, the political process, health and sanitation. We have also become aware of the ease with which the poor can be manipulated. We did a fairly good job of it for many decades. Yet it is frightening to see what can happen with a few agitators and good mass organizers who have little respect for law and order. The poor can be co-opted into violence, looting and bloodshed. This is especially true in a society where the gulf separating the poor from the affluent is increasing and where unemployment, and hence the lack of money, has already reached a critical point. (In Watts, more than one-fourth of the young men between 18 and 24 are unemployed.)

Finally, we have learned a bit more about the importance of the male in our society. Until the male poor can achieve a degree of self-esteem and a sense of autonomy and self-direction, we will continue to have female directed families and all the cyclical problems that accompany this sort of phenomenon. Marriage is a possibility only when two conditions exist: the male can support himself and hopefully his offspring. The female and offspring will be helped whether a male is present or not. So long as we give a premium in our offer of assistance to the family in which the male is absent, we will find illegitimacy continuing. It has to.



Many years ago, a Frenchman reacted with anger to the sordid conditions of his day. In the introduction to his book, Les Miserables, Victor Hugo wrote in 1862:

"So long as there shall exist by virtue of law and custom a social damnation artificially creating hells in the midst of civilization and complicating the destiny which is Divine with a fatality which is human;

"So long as the three great problems of the age-- the degradation of man through poverty, the ruin of women through hunger, the crippling of children through ignorance are not solved;

"So long as in certain regions social asphixia is still possible;

"In other words, and from a still wider point of view, so long as ignorance and wretchedness exist on earth, books like this cannot be useless."

I submit to you that similar conditions exist today. In the United States, no matter how successful we are with the Civil Rights struggle, we must recognize that freedom to stay poor is no freedom at all. One young man in Harlem put it even more bluntly: "What does it mean to be integrated into poverty?" In the other nations of the world, we are also faced with a challenge of enormous proportion. Peace will not be achieved unless poverty is eradicated. It is a simple proposition.

Let us resolve, therefore, to make the global war on poverty the task to which social work will contribute its total energy, its most creative minds and its best skills. I believe that this is the only way by which professional fulfillment can be achieved.

(Note: An address delivered by Dr. Daniel Thursz, Associate Director, VISTA at the Annual Meeting of the Maritime Conference on Social Welfare, Halifax, Nova Scotia, May 4, 1966.)









